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BEXP, EAID, MASS, KMCA, KPAO, GA
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: PROSPECTS FOR THE BILATERAL
RELATIONSHIP IN 2006

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Our assessment of prospects in 2006 for our overall Gambian relationship is guarded, as the recent slippage in the GOTG's record on human rights and democracy has reinforced President Jammeh's reputation for erratic behavior and overshadowed his government's achievements. Given the importance of the 2006-7 national elections for The Gambia's democratic evolution, Embassy strongly recommends a robust contribution to donor assistance for election-related preparations and will submit an ESF proposal via septel.

2.(C) Following The Gambia's selection for MCA eligibility, next steps in the MCA process are contingent on the GOTG's reversing the current negative human rights trend. Our bilateral trade and investment links are likely to continue to register modest expansion in 2006, and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency is increasingly active here. The Gambia has yet to take much advantage of its AGOA eligibility.

3. (S/NF) The GOTG's excellent cooperation in the Global War on Terrorism is underscored by our joint counter-terrorism operations targetting Al-Qaida, most recently in October 2005. SIMO/DAKAR continues to provide CT capacity-building assistance to the GOTG by, inter alia, training and equipping an elite CT unit. Regarding military cooperation, the Gambian armed forces have an established record of effective service in foreign peacekeeping operations -- e.g., in Darfur. However, the small (company-level) size of their contingents has so far ruled out their inclusion in the ACOTA Partnership program; the GOTG has indicated willingness to expand its Darfur contingent to a battalion in 2007.

14. (C) The Gambia, with its reservoir of pro-U.S. feeling, is fertile ground for the expanded public diplomacy outreach that the Embassy envisions in 2006. Despite The Gambia's limited capacity to influence U.S. interests for good or ill, we see compelling reasons to maintain, indeed, expand, our level of engagement here. At the same time, managing our Gambian relationship requires taking into account the rough-hewn Jammeh's penchant for erratic behavior and working to keep his expectations for the relationship realistic. END SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP

15. (S) There has been considerable improvement in the U.S./Gambian relationship in recent years, following The Gambia's holding of Presidential and National Assembly elections in 2001-2 that were judged credible by the international community, including the U.S. The re-elected President, Yahya Jammeh, whose coup in 1994 had caused bilateral ties to nosedive, took various steps to reach out to the U.S.: concluding an Article 98 Agreement (the second African state to do so), sharply reducing links with a heretofore key patron, Libya, adopting a more moderate and pro-Western foreign policy generally, and ending The Gambia's role as a conduit in sub-regional trafficking in arms and "conflict diamonds." He proved a useful partner in the Global War on Terrorism, as demonstrated in the GOTG's joint counter-terrorism operations with the U.S.

16. (C) The U.S. responded to Jammeh's moves, lifting the "508 Sanctions" imposed following the coup, granting AGOA eligibility, and restoring modest programs of military and economic assistance (the latter channeled largely through USAID's Acra-based West Africa Regional Program due to the

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mid-1990's closure of the bilateral USAID mission here). Meanwhile, we continued assistance programs not affected by the "508 Sanctions," e.g. Peace Corps Program, food aid channeled through the UN's World Food program and a NGO, Catholic Relief Services, and USAID-funded programs in such areas as combatting HIV/AIDS and promoting respect for human rights and democratic norms. Most recently, the Millenium Challenge Corporation's decision in November 2005 to grant The Gambia eligibility for the MCA program underscored the progress in restoring links.

PROSPECTS FOR 2006: FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY

17. (C) In our 2005 forecast (reftel), we judged prospects for maintaining the overall positive trend in the U.S./Gambian relationship as good. Our forecast for 2006 is more guarded; continued expansion of bilateral ties cannot be taken for granted. The reason: promotion of respect for human rights and democratic norms remains the top U.S. interest in The Gambia, but there has been slippage of late in the GOTG's performance in this area. In November, Jammeh had three prominent opposition politicians detained on what appear to be trumped-up charges. The trio was subsequently released on bail, but still face prosecution, as a rumored behind-the-scenes arrangement for the dropping of the charges has yet to materialize. Meanwhile, the relationship between the GOTG and the media remains strained, as Jammeh makes little secret of his distaste for the country's several private journals and their frequent attacks on him and his government.

18. (C) The current malaise in The Gambia's human rights and political arenas has reinforced the Gambian leader's reputation for erratic behavior and overshadowed his government's achievements in promoting stability and socio-economic reform and development. Among these achievements, Jammeh actively supported the National

Assembly's passage in June 2005 of the progressive "Children's Act." In this predominantly Muslim country, the President has fostered harmony with the Christian and animist minorities and made clear that propagation of radical Islamic views will not be tolerated. The GOTG, concerned at its relegation to the Category Two Watchlist in our 2005 TIP report, has markedly expanded its efforts to combat TIP in past months. The Gambia's status as a country on the path of reform and development seemed borne out in the relatively high rankings that it received in the MCA eligibility review process last fall in the "Investing in People" and "Encouraging Economic Freedom" categories. (NOTE: The Gambia's relatively positive 2005 rankings in the "Ruling Justly" category are at considerable risk of sharp decline unless the current slippage in the GOTG's human rights/democracy record is halted. END NOTE.)

¶9. (C) The Presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled for 2006-7 are potentially crucial milestones in The Gambia's still-fragile democratization process. These contests will serve as an important test of Jammeh's professed commitment to democratic values; his actions of late against the opposition have generated new doubts about the depth of that commitment. On a positive note, representatives of the respected NGO, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), observed The Gambia's National Assembly by-elections in September 2005 and judged them to be credible. Given our interest in promoting good elections in 2006-7 here, Embassy strongly recommends a robust U.S. contribution to donor assistance for election-related preparations and will submit an ESF proposal via septel; our proposal will be based on that submitted to us by IFES, which has indicated interest in assisting in The Gambia's election preparations.

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DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE: MCA AND OTHER PROGRAMS

¶10. (C) The Millenium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) selection of The Gambia for MCA eligibility in November 2005 raised the prospect of a major expansion of our efforts on behalf of another key U.S. objective in The Gambia: promoting economic growth and development. At present, though, next steps in the MCA process -- in particular, an initial visit by a senior MCC delegation -- are on hold, because of the slippage in the GOTG's record on human rights and democracy. We will continue to use MCA eligibility as leverage with the Gambians, stressing that progress toward a MCA compact as well as retention of MCA eligibility itself are contingent on efforts by the GOTG to reverse the current negative human rights trend.

¶11. (SBU) Meanwhile, the Peace Corps program, involving 100 volunteers deployed throughout the country, remains a key component of U.S. grassroots-level development and humanitarian assistance to The Gambia. Other efforts range from the Ambassador's funds for Self-Help projects and combating HIV/AIDS to a program fostering girls' school enrollment (Ambassadors' Girls Scholarship program) to DOD's Humanitarian Assistance and HIV/AIDS programs. In the past, the U.S. was a major donor of food aid, channelled through the World Food Program and a prominent, U.S.-based NGO, Catholic Relief Services; over the past year or so, our food aid has virtually ended due to growing emergency aid needs in other countries. A major British medical research institution, the Medical Research Center, is the beneficiary of a multi-year, two-million dollar grant from the The National Institutes of Health (NIH). Apart from the NIH grant, our bilateral assistance totals dols 1.5 million to 2 million annually, about half of which represents the cost of our Peace Corps program.

COMMERCIAL LINKS

¶12. (SBU) The modest growth in bilateral trade and investment links in recent years is likely to continue this year. In 2005 there were new U.S. investments here estimated at several million dollars, one project involving the kickoff of the Seaboard company's construction of a flour mill. U.S. investors also started work on a hotel and casino complex and finalized arrangements to take over a local fishing company. Another U.S. company, the Maryland-based BTI Construction and Supply, in partnership with the GOTG's Social Security and Housing Finance Corporation, recently broke ground on the first phase of a project to construct over 200 pre-fabricated houses in The Gambia. Indicative of The growing USG effort to promote commercial links, 2005 witnessed the U.S. Trade and Development Agency's (USTDA) signing of its first agreement in The Gambia, involving funding of almost dols 400,000 for a feasibility study for a petroleum storage facility. While prospects for implementation of the agreement are fading, due to other commitments of the U.S. firm contracted to do the study, USTDA recently signed a second agreement for a feasibility study, covering a Gambian entrepreneur's proposal for construction of a coal-fired power plant. Following the GOTG's December 2005 signing of a preliminary agreement with a Canadian firm for oil exploration, the Gambians indicate that they remain keen to elicit the interest of American firms as well. However, U.S. oil companies have so far been reluctant to pursue an exploration license due to uncertainty as to whether The Gambia's oil deposits are sufficient to make production commercially viable.

¶13. (SBU) The Gambia has yet to take much advantage of its AGOA eligibility (renewed for 2006); the annual value of its AGOA-qualified exports to the U.S. remains under dols

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100,000. The Embassy will continue to seek Department and USAID support to organize seminars for the Gambian government and business community on AGOA's "rules of the road" and prospects for increasing exports to the U.S. We will also continue to assist the GOTG in obtaining the AGOA-related "textile visa." The current lack of direct air and sea transport links between the two countries hampers the expansion of trade, but there are reports of several airlines' possible interest in establishing direct flights. The Gambian Civil Aviation Authority's (GCAA) progress to date in meeting relevant FAA requirements raises the possibility of Gambian-registered aircraft being authorized for direct flights to the U.S. in 2006.

COUNTER-TERRORISM -----

¶14. (S/NF) The global war on terrorism (GWOT) is an area in which bilateral cooperation is particularly strong and is likely to continue. Jammeh takes a close personal interest in this dossier and personally authorized the two counter-terrorism (CT) operations jointly conducted with the U.S. in recent years. Both operations, one in 2002 and the other in October 2005, involved the Gambian authorities detaining and questioning Al-Qaida-linked elements at U.S. behest. The GOTG has been equally responsive in other CT-related activities; Gambian intelligence and security officials show no hesitancy in sharing even the most sensitive information with us and have indicated openness to whatever forms of cooperation we wish to pursue with them. (NOTE: Following the joint CT operation in 2005, we have no evidence that Al-Qaida or other terrorist elements are currently active in The Gambia, although such elements may well be present but maintaining a low profile. While the country's Lebanese community includes sympathizers of Hizballah, there is no sign of their actual involvement in terrorist operations here, although, as elsewhere in Africa, they are presumably engaged in such activities as fund-raising on Hizballah's behalf. END NOTE.)

¶15. (S/NF) The head of the GOTG's National Intelligence Agency (NIA), Daba Marena, is a confidant of Jammeh, whose in-depth knowledge of the liaison activities involving NIA and SIMO/DAKAR testifies to the Gambian President's abiding interest in those activities. SIMO/DAKAR continues to assume the lead role in the USG's CT-related cooperation with the Gambians; its initiatives include, inter alia, assisting the NIA in the training and equipping of an elite CT unit -- a personal priority of Jammeh.

MILITARY COOPERATION

¶16. (C) 2005 witnessed some growth in our modest military cooperation programs, which consist chiefly of IMET, military-to-military contacts in areas ranging from combating HIV/AIDS to riverine operations, and ACSS activities. Of the military's small officer corps, many -- including Jammeh himself -- have participated in IMET training programs in the U.S., and the Gambians have expressed appreciation for the increased IMET funding in 2005-6. Jammeh himself has repeatedly appealed for expeditious action on the U.S. Navy's long-standing project, using unspent FMF funds, to provide technical assistance for the refurbishment of a U.S-supplied patrol boat. (NOTE: The Gambia's miniscule navy consists largely of several non-operational patrol boats. END NOTE.)

¶17. (C) Jammeh and his military aides make clear their desire for further expansion of our military cooperation, viewing the U.S. as an indispensable partner in their efforts to expand the capabilities of their tiny, 1,000-man army,

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particularly in the area of international peacekeeping. When Jammeh contributed a company of troops to the AMIS operation in Darfur in December 2004, he criticized our perceived failure to adequately support the deployment by providing APC's, asserting -- erroneously -- that there was a U.S. commitment to do so. We continue to impress upon the GOTG leadership that U.S. policy remains to channel assistance to troop contributing countries through the AU, in coordination with other donors. The Gambian military has an established record of effective service in an array of international and regional peacekeeping operations, but the small (company-level) size of its peacekeeping contingents has so far ruled out its inclusion in the ACOTA Partnership program. GOTG officials have indicated a willingness to increase their Darfur contingent to a battalion in 2007. (NOTE: We are told that furnishing a battalion is not feasible in 2006 due to the armed forces' domestic security duties, in support of the country's police force, during the year -- AU summit in July, Presidential election in fall. END NOTE.)

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: PRO-U.S. ENVIRONMENT

¶18. (SBU) The Gambia is fertile ground for the expanded public diplomacy outreach that the Embassy envisions in ¶2006. It is a moderate Muslim country in a turbulent region, and there is a discernible pro-U.S. feeling in the society that is striking -- and notably warmer than that vis-a-vis the former colonial power, Britain. Gambians from all walks of life, both elites and the public at large, make no secret of their admiration of America's democracy, its economic and technological prowess, and its culture of openness and change. While the country's free-wheeling press does not shrink from criticizing U.S. policies (e.g., occasional editorials taking issue with our Mideast policies), Gambians' overall view of the U.S. is favorable.

¶19. (SBU) Moreover, for a country so small, a remarkably large number of Gambians have extensive experience in the U.S. Numerous senior GOTG officials have pursued university studies in the U.S. As noted above, the military is replete

with officers that received training in the U.S. under IMET. The upshot is that, for many Gambians, positive views of the U.S. are based, not on a distant, utopian image, but on the reality of daily life in America. As for Gambians without experience in the U.S., they routinely express eagerness to know more about American society and to visit -- an eagerness that accounts in part for the high demand for visas, relative to other countries in the sub-region. (NOTE: Of course, as elsewhere, there is also a widespread desire among Gambians, especially youths, to escape poverty through immigration, legally or otherwise, to the U.S. END NOTE.)

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

120. (C) With its population of 1.5 million, annual per capita income of \$350, and severely resource-strapped government, The Gambia has limited capability to influence U.S. interests, for good or ill. At the same time, we see various compelling reasons to maintain -- indeed, expand -- our engagement with this country. One is the USG's universal commitment to foster democracy and human rights, promote sustainable development, and provide humanitarian assistance. Another reason centers on the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism; despite its exceedingly meager resources, the GOTG has shown that it is capable of serving as an effective partner in that War. A third reason relates to the key U.S. interest in promoting regional peace and stability; the GOTG helps advance that interest by contributing to peacekeeping operations, most recently, sending troops to Darfur and prior to that, Liberia. As a fourth reason, there is the reservoir of pro-U.S. feeling here -- a resource to draw upon in our

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efforts to build popular support for our initiatives targetting African and Muslim audiences. To be sure, managing our Gambian relationship requires taking into account Jammeh's rough-hewn, erratic character -- and working to keep his expectations for our bilateral ties realistic.
STAFFORD